

Curating Living History

A Case Study from Bent's Old Fort National Historic Site

Discussions of living history museums usually focus on the educational value or the interpretive practicalities of re-enactment.

Little attention is given to the curatorial issues endemic to living history sites. Although professional publications are beginning to acknowledge that living history requires different curatorial approaches¹, articles that specifically address the methodology² are still rare. This article examines living history from a curatorial perspective, highlighting some of the specific challenges that confront the staff at Bent's Old Fort National Historic Site.

The Bent St. Vrain Company built Bent's Fort in the early 1830s on the north bank of the Arkansas River in what later became La Junta, Colorado. The location of the adobe structure was carefully chosen to capitalize on the lucrative trade with Indian tribes (e.g., Cheyenne, Arapaho, Kiowa, and Comanche). The fort was also an important stop along the Mountain Route of the Santa Fe Trail.

Following its abandonment by William Bent in 1849, the fort was used as a stagecoach stop (1861-1881) and then as an area to graze cattle (1881-1884). By the time Bent's Old Fort became a National Historic Site in 1960, none of the original structure was visible above ground.

Following extensive archeological investigations in the 1960s, the National Park Service reconstructed the fort in 1975-1976. Today, this reconstructed building, together with its largely repro-

duction furnishings, affords unique educational and accessibility options for historical interpretation that would be impossible to achieve with an original resource. For visitor safety and to protect period pieces on exhibit, four rooms have barricades at the doors to prevent entry. However, visitors have unprecedented access to the fort and its furnishings in the other 30 rooms. Visitors regularly comment on the positive impact this accessibility has on their visits.

As a reconstruction, the fort is ideally suited to living history interpretation as used to tell the history of the site, its role as a cultural crossroads in the Southwest and its relationship to the Santa Fe Trail, the opening of the West and the War with Mexico. In fact, living history is the primary interpretive method used at the site. While numerous museums use living history on a seasonal or occasional basis, Bent's Old Fort NHS is part of a minority of museums that rely almost solely upon it. There are no interpretive labels within the fort and visitors learn about the history of the site from an introductory video, the park's brochure, and through interaction with the park's interpreters during living history tours and demonstrations.

As a reconstruction, Bent's Old fort was viewed by many NPS staff members, park volunteers and living history enthusiasts simply as an elaborate stage for living history re-enactment. With the exception of period pieces, virtually all of the furnishings were available for use. Objects on exhibit were used, and often consumed, as part of living history demonstrations. Furnishings were moved around as needed, regardless of their interpretive role in a given room or their inventoried location. Real meat hung in the pantry ready to be cooked, sometimes after having been killed on site. If tools were no longer useful in their current state, they were simply reshaped into something else. These practices were considered acceptable and perhaps even desirable since they added more "life" to the fort and a greater degree of realism.

Over the past decade, however, there has been a shift in attitude by successive generations of park staff regarding the interface between the reconstructed fort and living history. Fueling this shift has been the need to find a better balance

A volunteer demonstrates buttermaking. Food preparation is one of the basic curatorial problems that must be addressed in living history museums.



The use of tools, e.g., blacksmithing, is another curatorial issue that living history museums must address.

between telling the history of the fort and protecting the park's resources for future generations. The realization that a reconstructed resource is not exempt from preservation issues is due, in large part, to fiscal reality. The idea that reproduction objects can simply be replaced if consumed in living history is financially and practically untenable. Reproduction objects are very expensive, sometimes more so than originals. In addition, many of the reproductions currently on exhibit in the fort are no longer available. Finally, the hidden costs of replacing objects (including the considerable time it takes museum staff to find appropriate reproductions, catalog new objects, and deaccession consumed objects) cannot be ignored.

There are also preservation points to consider. The conservation of natural resources is an important issue when exhibits include furs of animals such as buffalo, elk, coyote, beaver, mink and other species. Moreover, the considerable amount of museum staff time devoted to finding, purchasing, and replacing reproductions directly detracts from the actual care of the park's existing museum collections, including the archeological artifacts from the original fort.

In addition to the financial and preservation constraints are the educational and visitor service issues. Since only 35% of the park's visitors take the guided tour, most visitors receive all of their information about the site from the introductory video and a self-guided tour. This fact focuses attention on the importance of the furnishings to tell the desired story in each room. To ensure that visitors receive a consistent message regardless of when they visit the fort and to improve object security, the furnished rooms should not vary according to the day of the week, staffing levels, or living history demonstrations. As a result, the value of the fort's furnishings as exhibits in and of themselves is now fully acknowledged.

The unique circumstances at Bent's Old Fort make strict adherence to all aspects of museum methodology an unrealistic challenge. For example, the environmental standards (temperature, relative humidity, visible light, Ultraviolet radiation, and particulate matter) set for museum exhibition spaces can never be achieved within the fort. Heating, ventilation and air conditioning (HVAC) systems are not available in the reconstructed fort. Light levels vary with the time of day and the season yet the use of shades or other devices would be inappropriate within the fort. Although some rooms do have Ultraviolet filters such films cannot be installed in windows that do not contain glass as is the case for many rooms in the fort.

It is important to recognize that the standards for collection management were developed for more traditional museums and original objects.



Having said that, the park's staff also has a professional and ethical responsibility to adhere to those standards whenever possible. In circumstances where it is not possible, acceptable compromises must be developed.

Within the framework of living history interpretation, successive generations of park staff have implemented various resource protection strategies. At a policy level, the park developed a written Consumptive Use Policy. This document clearly states the park's position that most furnishings in the fort are for exhibition purposes only. It goes on to explicitly state which objects can and cannot be used for living history demonstrations. Original, rare, or unusually expensive objects (period pieces, reproductions of Rio Grande blankets, modern Pueblo pottery, wine bottles reproduced from original archeological artifacts) are never used or even handled during tours or living history programs. Examples of museum objects approved for consumptive use include tools in the carpenter and blacksmith shops, specific examples of saddles and tack, and dishes, cutlery and cookware in the kitchen, dining room and other rooms approved for cooking. Objects purchased expressly for the living history collection, replaceable objects (e.g., candles, soap) and raw materials (e.g., lumber, coal, iron) may also be used in a consumptive manner.

The general park philosophy is that other reproduction objects can be handled and shown to visitors as long as they remain in their assigned rooms and are put back. If an object is needed for use in another room, outside the fort or in a consumptive manner, it must come from the park's living history collection. The exception to this general rule concerns the objects on exhibit in the trade room. With literally hundreds of objects in this

A volunteer demonstrates open hearth cooking.



room (a mixture of reproductions and period pieces) it is imperative that objects are not moved. From a security perspective, a static exhibit is absolutely necessary in this room. As such, objects used by interpreters for trade demonstrations must come from the living history box stored behind the trade counter.

Cataloging and inventory issues have also been a challenge at the park. NPS policy is that all objects on exhibit (original or reproduction) should be cataloged to the museum collection. While sensible for traditional museums, this policy creates a practical problem at Bent's Old Fort. Catalog numbers do not stay on pots cooked over open fires, dishes washed in the dishwasher (to comply with local health regulations), or tools used in the blacksmith's shop. Yet these objects also contribute significantly to the exhibits. Moreover, it would be cost and space prohibitive to have a duplicate set of reproductions to use for these living history demonstrations. As a result, these objects are designated as part of the living history collection and are inventoried or cataloged as such.

Although objects should not move between rooms, this invariably happens during special events when the park has a large number of living history enthusiasts as volunteers. To reduce the inventory time after special events, objects that regularly move in spite of staff lectures (e.g., fire-place tools, tin cups, etc.) are labeled with room numbers in addition to their catalog numbers. This system, together with the use of photographs for each room, ensures that objects are easily and quickly returned to their proper locations after events.

Pest management is also an important resource protection issue. Some of the basic tenets of Integrated Pest Management (blocking access to the museum, eliminating food sources), however, can never be fully achieved at Bent's Old Fort. The reconstruction was such that structural elements allow easy access for mice, bats, and birds. Moreover, a site that cannot block access for such large animals does not have much hope of keeping out dermestids, wood boring beetles, and other destructive pests. In addition, food items are used in exhibits and during period cooking demonstrations, thereby introducing food sources to attract pests. Within these parameters, however, there are effective means of control. First, good housekeeping is essential. Second, widespread trapping procedures are in place. Third, a List of Approved Foods as Exhibit Props is included in the park's housekeeping plan. Although fake foods are used, many of the foods on exhibit (biscuits, coffee beans, tea, dried chili peppers, etc.) are real. In such cases, regular monitoring and periodic replacement of food items are critical for the detection and prevention of infestations. Finally, good food handling practices are imperative. Interpretive programs that involve food preparation require that dishes are washed, spills are cleaned up, soiled towels and cloths removed, and food is stored properly. After special events, all unapproved food sources are removed from the fort's rooms.

Finding an appropriate balance between resource preservation and use is a common struggle for the National Park Service and museums around the world. Although a reconstructed resource may appear to simplify this issue, in many instances it actually complicates it. Although living history is still a vital part of the educational programming at Bent's Old Fort, it occurs within boundaries that are more clearly defined and include the park's preservation mandate.

Notes

- ¹ Rebecca A. Buck and Jean Allman Gilmore, *The New Museum Registration Methods* (Washington, DC: American Association of Museums, 1998).
- ² Bob Cottrell, "The Challenges of Collections Care in Living History Museums," *History News* 50:3 (Summer, 1995), 14-19.

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All photos courtesy Bent's Old Fort National Historic Site.